

ALOFT.

HOW IT FEELS TO TAKE WING.

*Member of "The Times" Staff
Tells of Flight.*

*Mental Experience Like Life
in Another Sphere.*

*Passage Made With Paulhan
in Farman Biplane.*

BY ROBERT H. WILLSON.

There could hardly have been any one in Los Angeles who had awaited with more intense interest the opportunity to see a heavier-than-air machine leave the earth and soar toward the sky than I. I had followed the development of the aeroplane from the first accounts of those early experiments made by the Wright brothers years ago in North Carolina, as a thorough believer. I hoped some day to see the miracle of success for myself.

On the first day that I saw a human being take wings and fly this strange new creature rose almost a mile into the air and seemed about to vanish at the zenith as a Martian homeward bound. Yesterday I took a seat in this same craft of M. Paulhan and sailed forth on limitless, uncharted seas for a passage of air. With a sense of all that lay behind this moment—cherished visions, blasted hopes, triumphs and lives laid down, it seemed the sensations of those few minutes would rarely be paralleled in a lifetime.

Flying, to me, was like a taste of life in another sphere. It is almost reincarnation, for my consciousness tells me I was not created to fly. The sensation finds no place among those which hereditary instinct and environment have made natural.

I have asked a number of those who have made trips with M. Paulhan to describe the trip. Some said it was "grand," others that it was "wonderful," and the cautious that it was "perfectly safe." I was disappointed that the replies were monosyllabic. It seemed to me that it would be a story worth telling. Probably my experience was different from that of any one else. Flying is a mental rather than a physical experience and mental experiences of different people never coincide. The impressions of a devout Mohammedan on visiting Mecca are quite different from those of a chance tourist. I was a devout believer in aviation when many of my friends sat in the seats of the scornful. Therefore yesterday I sat in the seat of an aeroplane and looked down upon them with that mild toleration they were wont to show the "airship cranks."

TOUJOURS DEMAIN.

Anticipation works charms with reality that are not exceeded by illusion. Last Thursday M. Paulhan first promised me a flight. It was to be the next day. From that time forward every conceivable obstacle interfered with the plan. It came to be a stock joke between M. Paulhan and myself—"toujours demain" (always tomorrow.) That was our salutation every morning and the parting word at night.

On Sunday night the time came. It was growing dark and the big Farman machine was ready to go to the hangar. Because Clifford Harmon had just cabled his order to France for one of the biplanes Paulhan invited him for a final trip around the course. When they came back I suggested there might be time for another flight. "Demain" (tomorrow,) replied Paulhan.

"Toujours demain," I replied. A trace of a smile flitted over his face. I turned away. A moment later Masson put his hand on my shoulder. "Monsieur Paulhan says, will you go with him?"

The only point to this part of the story is that it emphasizes the element of anticipation. The mechanics worked for fifteen minutes to start the refractory engine, and could not get a single explosion. We climbed down from our seats and gave up the attempt.

Yesterday afternoon I climbed to the passenger's seat for a second time. M. Paulhan took his place. Masson seized the propeller blade and gave it a twist. There was no response from the engine. Again the fates seemed to be conspiring, amusing themselves with that clumsy joke, "toujours demain." It was necessary to put on new spark plugs before there was a single explosion.

AT REVOIR

But at last it came, the most expressive human gesture, I think, that I have ever seen. M. Paulhan thrust his arms straight out from the shoulder, with the palms of his hands turned backward. The little push he gives in the air is so slight that it is hardly perceptible. It seems to express all that is involved in launching off into space upon frail wings—delicacy, poise, complete separation from all that is behind, absolute confidence in what lies before. It is M. Paulhan's signal to his assistants that all is right, to release the machine. He might use any other sign, but nothing would tell the story as this does. I have seen him scores of times and the gesture never fails to bring a thrill, just as the moment when the machine leaves the ground is always an unexpected miracle, no matter how many times one has seen it.

We were off. After that sweep of Paulhan's arms, you know that he is bearing you skyward. There is no further possibility that the machine might not leave the ground. I waited intently for that instant, so impressive from below, when the great bird lifts its feet and almost seems to fold them for the flight. It is hardly perceptible to the passenger. The wheels transmit very little vibration to the frame of the machine, and as a matter of fact, the lifting sensation begins before the upward angle is taken. It is only when the eye records the fact of being clear of the ground that the experience of flying begins.

Suspended between heaven and earth by the single fact of motion, one seems to have taken a leap into the cosmic. We had become inhabitants of the universe, having lost terrestrial identity. I have never made a balloon trip, but I cannot imagine that it would be at all the same. There, something pulls you up or lets you down; with a pair of wings you jump off into space and are free.

STRANGE EXHILARATION.

The swiftness of motion undoubtedly has something to do with this strange exhilaration. The sense of inertia in contact with things material is gone. In its place comes a sense of being a part of that phenomenon of motion, of which light waves, sound waves, molecular energy, everything that is known of the universe is a part.

With a conscious effort I brought myself back to observe some physical aspects of the journey. We had barely risen to flying height from the ground when a ravine opened before us. For a fraction of a second I looked to see Paulhan take some action, and then I remembered that the contour of the earth had no significance. A sense of the character of the earth's surface is one of the instinctive things always with us. If you walk across the street the cerebellum is ready to lift a foot over the curb. If you run, at the edge of a ditch you slacken speed or jump. In the air your pathway is as smooth as the courses of the stars.

As we lifted higher into the air and gained speed I looked backward to see if I could not encourage a little sense of fear or danger. It was not there. The sense of motion or momentum allays all such impressions. It is one of the primal laws of the universe that a body set in motion will continue until motion is overcome by resistance. The resistance of the air which lifts you up does not reach the consciousness. For that reason you feel that you will fly forever if you choose. In this there is no fear, but only blissful contemplation.

NO SENSE OF SPEED.

In the air I find a great distinction between the impression of motion and that of speed. Speed has a relation to the ground and means very little away from its surface. In this brief journey in air the only thing that gave an impression of speed was turning the head. The draft of air drawn away from the nostrils astonished me, and I quickly faced about to the front to get a full breath. Aviation should offer a splendid means of lung development. The nostrils are forced wide open and the lungs are forcibly inflated as a balloon is filled. I have ridden at sixty miles an hour in the open air without getting the effect. I could only explain it by the suction of that air directly behind, which seemed to be drawing air straight through a sieve.

On the first circle M. Paulhan made a grand detour, out over the fences and the fields. We came down the course above the automobiles and the grand stand. People were waving their hands and looking up. It should have been very impressive, but I must confess it was not. People, what they are doing, and things below are blurred in an atmosphere of unreality. I have sometimes wondered at Paulhan's air of aloofness from the applause and admiration of the crowd, but it is more easily understood after a voyage. I should almost expect the first of the coming race of aviators to display an unconscious contempt for mundane events and associations.

There is a temptation to try to right the ship as it swings on the turns of the course and tilts its wings. I gathered from a little motion of M. Paulhan's head that he anticipated this action on my part and wished me to sit as unconcerned as any part of the machine. In a canoe or on a bicycle it would be natural to use the body. In an aeroplane there comes a new sense of security in catching the pulse from the wings.

I wrenched my attention away from the fascination of flying to look across at the mountains, the city and the sea, but that was only a matter of looking down from a high elevation. It was not dizzying as it is to look long from the top of Eiffel Tower or the Washington Monument. Motion dispels all that.

ABSOLUTE SAFETY.

Having passed the grand stand, M. Paulhan kept well out over the long line of people filing down toward the street cars. The aviator's hand was resting idly on the lever. I tried to imagine the engine stopping and the people scurrying away from below, but it was too improbable. I knew, too, from what I had seen of the machine as it glided to the earth from a height that it would simply swing back into the course and touch the ground like a feather. It was impossible to gather a single thrill of danger.

On the second circuit of the course M. Paulhan made a turn across the center of the field and headed out toward the beach. He is so volatile that I thought he might be going back to take another look at those "poissons" (fish) he told me he had seen on the trip with Mme. Paulhan. As he reached the last pylon on the course, however, he made a sudden turn to the left. The craft veered instantly and listed to starboard. It was one of those moments in a yacht when you slack away quickly on the main sheet and prepare for the boom to jibe. The biplane slid away on the new slant without a quiver.

I expected to descend at the end of the second lap, but was surprised at the plunge we took just before we reached the grand stand. It was like a rude awakening from sleep to find that we were shooting toward the earth at an angle of forty-five degrees. I had often watched the descent and marveled at its ease and grace. M. Paulhan sometimes glides from an altitude of several hundred feet and at an angle of forty-five degrees until within a few feet of the earth. He often seems to be coming too straight down when you are below, but from above it seems straighter still. It was with genuine regret and a new and discouraging sense of impotence that I climbed down from the seat—regret that the trip was over and had seemed so short, impotence in having to depend on any other method of locomotion.

AVIATION DIFFICULT.

It did not seem as simple to grasp the art of aviation, in spite of that sense of security, as it had before I went up. If my hand had been on the controlling lever and the throttle, I should have felt like a blind man running at top speed along the extreme edge of a precipice. That forward elevator plane of the Farman machine, to Paulhan, is like antennae to an insect. He feels his way up and down and balances himself on the turns without touching anything. This feeling one's way, with nothing to touch, is uncanny. Paulhan also seems to be in rapport with that marvel of an engine behind him. After he has listened to see if any of the seven cylinders are missing, he pauses still another moment to get some telepathic communication that it is in perfect tune. It is a finer sense than that of seeing or hearing, apparently.

No one can tell how soon flying may become a common experience. It will hardly be for some time yet, although present developments are startlingly rapid. As the human mind becomes accustomed to the idea, the intensity of the impressions on a first flight may be lessened. For my first flight I can say without exaggeration that it ran quite beyond the range of limitations which seem to have been fixedly imposed by the principles of time, space and cause and effect. When you feel these things vanishing into unrealities and yourself still confident and secure of independent being, you take a long look over into the realm of immortality. These pictures of angels on wings may, after all, be more literally symbolic of a future existence that we have realized.